

**HUMAN RESOURCES PILOT  
ETHNIC FOCUS GROUP PROJECT:  
SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Prepared by**



**California Mental Health Planning Council  
Human Resources Project**

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## **Human Resources Pilot Ethnic Focus Group Project**

### **Background**

The California Mental Health Planning Council has identified the shortage of human resources at all levels as one of the most urgent issues facing the mental health system. The shortage was found to be most acute for child psychiatrists and licensed clinical social workers and especially for multilingual and multicultural staff in all mental health occupations. In an effort to address the crisis facing the mental health system, the Planning Council developed the Human Resources Project directed by its Human Resources Committee. The project is conducted in collaboration with the California Institute for Mental Health and is funded by the State Department of Mental Health and Zellerbach Family Fund.

The project has many components, including:

- Expanding the capacity of postsecondary education
- Work readiness in the classroom
- Multilingual and multicultural pipeline strategies
- School-to-career strategies
- Job retraining for mental health occupations in the public sector
- Direct consumer and family member employment
- Licensing boards and professional recruitment
- Rural strategies
- Community redefinition, corporate partnerships, and collaboration

As one component of this project, the Planning Council sought to document the barriers and obstacles to social services and mental health professions for persons of color. Human Resource Project staff convened a series of four pilot focus groups with social work professionals and academics from various ethnic populations in California. The purpose of these groups was to identify barriers that are keeping ethnic students from choosing social work as a profession and to develop strategies to overcome these barriers.

This report includes a description of the methodology utilized in conducting the focus groups and findings and recommendations for attracting more persons of color into social services and mental health occupations.

## **Methodology**

Based on current California demographics, the Committee chose to convene the pilot focus groups targeting social workers from three of the most prevalent ethnic communities, Latino(a), Asian/Pacific Islander, and African American. The first ethnic focus group was held in Santa Ana on November 14, 2001 for social workers from the Latino(a) community. The second group for social workers from the Asian/Pacific Islander community was held in Los Angeles on November 30, 2001. A third focus group was convened for social workers from the African American community and was held in San Francisco on March 26, 2002. In order to gain the rural perspective, a second Latino(a) focus group was held in the Central Valley town of Modesto on May 22, 2002.

In order to stimulate and encourage open dialogue, focus group facilitators were of the same ethnicity as the group participants. All but one of the facilitators had a social services background. In addition to stimulating and guiding the discussion, the facilitators drafted summary reports of recommendations from each focus group. The facilitators were Sylvia Rodrigues-Andrew, Dean of the School of Social Work, San Jose State University; Taffany Lim, Consultant; Liz Dunbar-Knox, MEd, MSW, EdD, Title IV-E Child Welfare Project Coordinator, School of Social Work, San Francisco State University; Jose Martin, LMFT, Administrative Programs Manager, Contra Costa County Health Services. The Planning Council sought to convene the focus groups at host facilities within local ethnic communities. Dedicated hosts assisted with the details of planning each event, including locating a suitable site, arranging for lunch for the participants and facilitator, and extending invitations to MSWs and LCSWs from their local ethnic community. The Planning Council was fortunate to have the assistance and cooperation of the following individuals and their agencies in the planning of the four pilot focus groups: Luis Garcia, MA, Corporate Director, Pacific Clinics, Arcadia; Gladys Lee, LCSW, Chief Professional Officer, Pacific Clinics, Arcadia; Sonji Walker, MSW, Special Assistant, San Francisco City and County Department of Human Services; and Connie Moreno-Peraza, MSW, LCSW, Administrator, Alcohol and Drug Programs and Cultural Competence, Stanislaus County Department of Behavioral Health and Recovery Services.

Nearly all of the focus group participants were MSWs or LCSWs although a few were in the process of completing the requirements for their MSW degree. Most of the participants were female, reflecting the current overall prevalence of women in social work professions. The ages of participants varied widely from the early twenties to the late fifties. Years of experience in the field varied equally widely from zero to twenty-nine years of post-MSW experience. Participants were drawn from various disciplines including mental health, medical social work, children and family services, adult services, child welfare, women's shelters, and private practice. (For more details on the individual focus groups, please see the summary reports attached as Appendices A–D.)

Participants were asked questions that had been developed earlier by the Human Resources Committee, focusing on four main issues (see Appendix E):

1. Personal motivations for becoming a social worker
2. Image of social work at the cultural/community level
3. Barriers/challenges to becoming a social worker
4. Retention of social services professionals in the field

Participants of all four pilot groups responded to the facilitators' questions favorably and engaged in very spirited, candid, and sometimes emotional dialogue. In some cases the two-and-a-half hours allotted to the focus groups seemed inadequate, as many participants were reluctant to leave or continued their dialogue after the session had ended. There were many commonalities between the groups in the issues raised. At the same time, each ethnic group provided a unique perspective on the issues surrounding the recruitment and retention of social services professionals. The following sections summarize the discussion from the four focus groups on the four main issues.

### **Personal Motivations for Becoming a Social Worker**

The one unique characteristic shared by all focus group participants, regardless of ethnicity, was that none of them started out with the intention of becoming a social worker. All participants had originally selected other careers or undergraduate majors. Many were not even aware of social work as a potential profession at the time that they were entering college. In most cases, respondents were drawn into the social work profession by chance or by the wish to help others. Many were attracted by the opportunity presented to work with children and families. They shared a common desire expressed throughout the groups to "give something back to their community." Students were almost universally drawn into social work because they were seen, either by themselves or by others, as being "good with people."

African American and Latino(a) social workers, in particular, stated that another strong personal motivator for choosing a career in social work was the influence of mentors from their own ethnic community. A number of participants recommended that one way to attract more ethnically diverse students into the field of social work would be to encourage more ethnic college professors to commit to and to participate in mentorship programs.

Formal and informal support systems, such as family and friends, were another often-cited personal motivator for those entering the social work profession. In contrast, as with Asian/Pacific Islander participants, lack of such familial understanding and support often served as a significant barrier to those choosing to enter the social services field. In cases where family and friends supported students' decision to pursue careers in social work, the students benefited from community support mechanisms, such as convenient child care that enabled them to complete their degree programs.

Another personal motivator cited by both African American and Latino(a) focus group participants was drawn from their own life experiences as children growing up in their ethnic communities where, in many cases, they experienced poverty and social unrest. One Latino participant recounted the experience of working as a high school mentor with a student from a local elementary school who had recently arrived from San Salvador. The child had experienced his entire family being taken away by soldiers and had never seen them again. The horrors of political strife in their native countries and the poverty of immigrant communities here in America served as motivators to these participants to "rise up" and to pursue careers in social work in order to effect change in their local communities.

### **Image of Social Work at the Cultural/Community Level**

As mentioned previously, for many participants the lack of understanding of social work on the part of members of their families or communities created a barrier to their pursuing their degree in social work. Participants from the Asian/Pacific Islander community indicated

that social work in general is not viewed favorably in their community. Social work is typically regarded as low paying and lacking in prestige as compared with other occupations, particularly by Asian/Pacific Islander males. Focus group participants suggested that this negative stereotype of the profession might be partially due to a lack of awareness about what social workers actually do. Language barriers may further compound the misunderstanding, as the term “social services” might cause some members of ethnic communities to confuse social work with other “service” occupations, such as janitorial work. Participants recommended community outreach to enhance the image of social work and to promote its strengths, particularly among young Asian/Pacific Islander men.

African American participants also encountered negative stigma attached to social work. One participant from the African American focus group stated that she was introduced to social work through a “less than positive” experience when she entered the foster care system. In her case, however, this early experience served as a motivator for her to become a professional social worker so that she could have a positive influence on the system.

Participants from all four focus groups agreed that the image of social work at the community level would benefit from some positive exposure and community outreach. A number of them recommended that young people at the junior high and high school levels should be given a clear introduction to the social work profession. High school counselors, many of whom are surprisingly unaware of the field of social work, also need to be educated about social work, as they are the ones offering guidance to young people who are planning their futures. Focus group participants were in nearly universal agreement that the image of social work would also improve if social workers were to receive higher salaries and compensation for their work.

### **Barriers/Challenges to Becoming a Social Worker**

Focus group participants identified numerous challenges that they encountered in pursuit of their graduate degrees in social work. Financial barriers were the ones most often cited by participants. Whether African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Latino(a), participants indicated that they had encountered serious difficulty meeting the expenses of graduate school at the same time as they were struggling with living and child care expenses. Financial aid was identified as the most important source of support that allowed students to pursue their MSWs and careers in social work. Participants recommended that colleges and universities engage in community outreach to increase awareness of the different types of financial assistance available to students, such as scholarships, grants, 20/20 programs, and stipends. Public sector employers sponsor 20/20 programs for employees to pursue advanced degrees. Employees are paid for a 40-hour workweek while they attend school 20 hours per week. This benefit is contingent upon a commitment to work in the public sector for a specified number of years upon graduation. The Asian/Pacific Islander focus group further recommended that the California Mental Health Planning Council should advocate for additional forms of financial assistance, such as the loan forgiveness programs currently available to students in medical programs.

Another barrier encountered by ethnic students entering graduate programs is cultural isolation. African American and Latino(a) participants in particular stated that on entering graduate school they were surprised to encounter a scarcity of professors and school administrators from their ethnic groups. In addition, in many cases they found themselves to be the only student of their ethnicity (or one of only a few) in their graduate programs.

The resulting cultural isolation they experienced served to undermine their self-confidence as they faced the daunting specter of the graduate program. Focus group participants recommended that more schools of social work emphasize cultural diversity and encourage development of ethnic social groups on college campuses to foster an environment of inclusiveness.

Entrance requirements to graduate programs posed another significant barrier for all ethnic students but could be particularly intimidating for many Latino(a) and Asian/Pacific Islander students for whom English was their second language. Many of these students struggled in their early schooling with learning English and accordingly were often not seen as “college material” by their instructors. Some internalized this perception and found that they lacked the self-confidence to even pursue a graduate degree. When these students got to graduate school, they often found they were unprepared academically to write research and analysis papers, take exams, or prepare a thesis. Focus group participants recommended that colleges and universities offer ethnic students entering graduate school tutorials in writing, basic study skills, and analytical thinking to prepare them for graduate school work.

### **Retention of Social Services Professionals in the Field**

Participants from all four focus groups agreed that in order to keep social workers from leaving the social services for other fields, the economic pay disparity between social work and other occupations must be adjusted. The most effective incentives for retention include such economic incentives as higher salaries, bilingual pay, and flexible work schedules.

In addition to financial incentives for retention, focus group participants from all ethnic groups indicated a need for adequate training to prepare managers and supervisors to work effectively with a diverse workforce. Participants recounted numerous negative experiences with managers, supervisors, and co-workers who lacked cultural competency. Cultural competency training, when offered, is too often directed at front line staff with relatively little attention given to the training of supervisors. Latino(a) social workers stated that all too often they encountered supervisors who did not understand the nuances of working with Latino families and expected the same style and time allotment as working with White families. Participants stressed the importance of having a supportive supervisor as a critical factor in assisting ethnic employees to succeed in public mental health agencies.

A related cultural issue is the increased burden placed upon bilingual social workers. A bilingual social worker will often be assigned all cases in his or her language or ethnic group and as a result may have a much higher caseload than monolingual co-workers. This situation easily leads to “burn out” and contributes to issues of retention. In addition, many focus group participants expressed the frustration of feeling marginalized as “just bilingual social workers.” Supervisors and administrators must be educated to recognize and value bilingual social workers and their contribution. In addition, bilingual social workers would benefit from reduced caseloads and more opportunities for advancement to keep them in the profession.

According to focus group participants, another factor that would contribute to retention would be to have more members of ethnic groups represented at management and policy development levels. African American and Latino(a) participants in particular stated that seeing others like themselves in positions of authority gave them the message that ethnic professionals were valued in the system.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

The four pilot focus groups yielded a number of valuable recommendations for schools of social work and the public mental health system to attract more persons of color into graduate school programs and to retain ethnic diversity in the field.

#### **Participants suggested that schools of social work should:**

- Encourage more ethnic college professors to commit to and participate in mentorship programs
- Increase awareness of the different types of financial assistance available to students, such as scholarships, grants, 20/20 programs, and stipends
- Emphasize cultural diversity and encourage development of ethnic social groups on college campuses
- Offer ethnic students entering graduate school programs tutorial courses in writing, study skills, and analytical thinking to prepare them for graduate school work
- Offer community support mechanisms, such as convenient child care

#### **Participants suggested that the public mental health system should:**

- Engage in more community outreach to enhance the image of social work and to promote its strengths, particularly among young ethnic men
- Introduce social work to young people at the junior high and high school levels
- Educate high school guidance counselors about the social work profession
- Advocate for additional forms of financial assistance, such as loan forgiveness programs
- Increase salaries and compensation including bilingual pay and flexible work schedules for social workers
- Adjust the economic pay disparity between social work and other occupations
- Provide training to prepare managers and supervisors to work effectively with a diverse workforce
- Train and promote more ethnic professionals to positions in management and policy development
- Educate supervisors and administrators to recognize and value bilingual social workers and their contribution, in order to minimize “burn out”
- Reduce caseloads for bilingual social workers and offer more opportunities for advancement

## **CALIFORNIA MENTAL HEALTH PLANNING COUNCIL**

**Latino(a) Focus Group**

**November 14, 2001**

**Santa Ana, California**

**Facilitator: Sylvia Rodrigues-Andrew**

### **Summary**

The California Mental Health Planning Council identified the increasing shortage of professional social workers, particularly in public mental health as a major problem that will require immediate and long-range planning. In an effort to obtain insight about factors that support and inhibit Latinos(as) from pursuing careers in social work, a focus group was conducted with social workers employed in various settings to learn what Schools of Social Work and Mental Health Departments could do to recruit and train more multicultural and bilingual professional social workers. The Council is planning to hold several additional focus groups as part of their planning process.

Using the *Conocimiento* process, participants described their personal motivation for choosing a career in social work and the support systems that contributed to their success in graduate school. The group identified culturally competent supervisors and administration as an important, yet often overlooked factor in retaining highly diverse professional social workers.

The group identified several strategies for improving the “pipeline” to the profession such as strengthening the collaboration between local high schools and community colleges, improving the public image of the profession, and developing partnerships between professional organizations such as the Latino Social Work Network and high schools. There was a general consensus among the group that their commitment to social change and making a difference in their communities were factors that led them to a career in social work. These same factors continue to keep them in the profession.

### **Background**

The California Mental Health Planning Council advocates for children, adults and older adults with serious emotional disturbances or mental illness. The Council also provides oversight and accountability for the public mental health system, serves in an advisory role to the Administration and Legislature on priority issues and participates in statewide planning.

Shortages in human resources at all levels of service has emerged as one of the most urgent issues facing the mental health system that will require immediate and long term strategies to address this serious problem. One of those strategies aims to examine the recruitment and retention of multicultural and multilingual social workers into public mental health. A series of focus groups with culturally and ethnically diverse mental health staff are being organized in an effort to obtain insight into what graduate schools of social work and public mental health departments can do individually and collaboratively to recruit more multicultural students into professional social work, particularly public mental health.



The first of these ethnic focus groups was held on November 14, 2001 in Santa Ana with six Latinos(as) currently employed in the Orange County area by various social service organizations. The gender of the participants was evenly mixed, three were women and three were men. The group reported 0 to 29 years of post-MSW experience. One of the six participants is currently in their second year of graduate school and one is planning to begin graduate school next fall. Three are graduates from California State University Long Beach; two graduated from the University of Southern California and one is currently attending Loma Linda University. The ages of the participants range from 20 to 50. The Mental Health Planning Council sign-in roster shows that three of the participants list mental health as their area of employment, two list behavioral health and one lists child welfare.

## **Conocimiento**

As participants arrived, they were asked to respond to a series of questions on newsprint that would be used as the basis for individual introductions before beginning the focus group questions. This exercise, based on Latino culture, stresses the importance of establishing relationships and respect for the individual, their work and their accomplishments. The six brief questions were:

1. What is your name and how do you prefer to be addressed?
2. Where do you work and what is your sub-specialty?
3. How long have you been in the field?
4. What has been the longest time spent in any social work job?
5. How do you identify yourself ethnically?
6. Share one thing (skill) you do successfully when working with members of the public who are of a different ethnicity and culture

Responses to the first question established each of the participants' preference for how they wish to be addressed. For example, one of the participants signed his name exactly as he wanted to be addressed and elaborated on why he is known in one county by his nickname while the other county knows him by his more formal name. His preference is for his formal name.

There was a slight discrepancy between the employment areas participants listed on the more formal Mental Health Planning Council sign-in roster and what participants described in the *conocimiento* exercise. For example, two of the six participants indicated that they work in mental health, three in child welfare and one in children's mental health.

Participants reported having 8 to 27 years experience in social work. Generally, participants tended to remain in their chosen field of social work for at least three years. Five reported staying 8-15 years in a particular employment setting and one stayed for three years.

Ethnic and cultural self-identity of the participants reflects the diversity of the Latino population in California. Like their clients, participants described their experiences in “checking the appropriate box” to indicate their ethnicity and the historical significance of terms that have been used in an attempt to capture the diversity that exists within the Latino population. None of the participants simply indicated their preference; instead each participant explained why they chose a specific term to describe themselves. For example, two of the six indicated that they identify themselves as Mexican American because their family is from Mexico while the other spent most of her youth living in a “border town,” two participants preferred the term “Latino(a)” because it was a more inclusive term and one participant identified themselves as “Hispanic” because of the negative connotations associated with other terms. Finally, one participant elaborated on their preference for the term “Hispanic” because the term tends to be inclusive and embraces the fact that Hispanic groups share a common language.

The final question asked participants to describe one thing or skill they have used successfully when working with a client who is of a different ethnicity or culture. Most of their responses focused on their ability to establish rapport by making a conscious effort to look for commonalities, a willingness to learn about a different culture, and most importantly the need to listen to clients. According to one participant, “clients often tell us they are always being *talked to*, no one ever *listens*.”

### **Personal Motivation for Becoming a Social Worker**

As each participant described the factors and circumstances leading to their decision to pursue social work, it became apparent that all of them had originally selected other careers or undergraduate majors. None of the six participants indicated that they had made a deliberate decision to enter a baccalaureate program with a clearly delineated major in social work. Of the four participants that identified their original career/major, two were actually enrolled in business and/or accounting classes when they realized they didn’t enjoy the classes, one participant was interested in pursuing psychiatry until she learned of the mathematics requirements. One participant was interested in law because of its focus on social justice and advocacy. Participants indicated that they did not know much about the profession of social work. Rather, it was the observations and recommendations of friends and mentors that sparked an interest in social work as a career. For example, half of the participants described how their friends would tell them they were “good with people.” The participants then took the initiative to find out exactly what social workers did. One participant made a deliberate decision to visit the University’s Career Center and another described attending the School of Social Work’s first open house as factors that helped influence their choice to pursue social work. In addition, all participants expressed their own life experiences and desire to help their community “rise up” as critical factors in their decision. Most were able to recall the dysfunction and poverty in their own communities as playing a key role in their decision to consider social work as the profession that would allow them to use their skills in working with people while advocating for social change.

Participants recalled the small group discussions, faculty that were involved in both teaching and practice, internship (or practicum) opportunities, and classroom discussion focusing on contemporary social problems as factors that affirmed social work was just “the right fit” for

them. In general, the group described their first practicum experiences as a factor that eventually led to their current employment in child welfare, family services and mental health. About half of the participants recalled working with children and youth and soon realized that by focusing on mental health they could work with the entire family. One participant began her career in women's health and could see the impact of related problems such as domestic violence, substance abuse and eventually the interface with children's protective services. As a result of these early experiences, she became interested in knowing what happens when she reports domestic violence or child abuse. As an experienced child welfare professional for the past 13 years, she finds that this system offers many opportunities for expanding one's knowledge and professional development. As a result, she feels she is "always learning."

One of the participants described her undergraduate placement in emergency response and placement services, as giving her the opportunity to identify areas for reform. She wants to pursue graduate education because she sees a need for leadership and social workers that are committed to "driving the system rather than stalling it." Another participant agreed and believes that administration offers a wider range of opportunities for Latino(as) to make a difference in impacting policies and the mental health system.

One of the recent graduates talked about a specific experience that led to his decision to pursue a career in public mental health. He recalled the time he was working as a high school student mentor at a local elementary school when he noticed that one of the youth who had recently arrived from San Salvador was routinely seeing the School Psychologist for numerous acting out behaviors. As he worked with this youngster, he learned that this young person witnessed his entire family taken by soldiers. He never saw his family again. Later, while playing in his yard he "saw a hand sticking out of the ground." For many recent immigrants escaping persecution in their countries, this story is not unusual. But for this participant, he wondered why no one had bothered to take the time to talk to this youngster about this traumatic experience and its relationship to his current difficulties. It was this experience that led the participant to realize that mental health is an integral part of social work and he wanted to be part of it.

### **Support Systems and Barriers to Graduate School Education**

Participants were asked to identify the support systems that helped them pursue graduate social work education, what kept them in school and what were some of the barriers that keep Latino(as) from pursuing graduate social work education.

#### **Personal Factors**

Personal factors include formal and informal support systems such as family, friends, mentors and internal factors that influenced their decision to pursue and succeed in graduate school. Half of the participants emphasized the strong support they received from their immediate and extended families. The participant planning to enroll in graduate school stated that she had been thinking about graduate school for the past several years and made her decision on the fact that she has a supportive spouse and a three-year-old daughter who will begin preschool. Without a supportive family the participant did not believe she could

return to school. Another participant recalled that she had no family when she arrived in California and instead “created one” by finding an exceptional caretaker for her then three-month-old daughter. The caretaker has remained a “part of their family” to this day. Having “great childcare” and a supportive husband allowed her to attend school on a full time basis. One of the participants also described the strong support he received from his family. Although his family was not able to provide financial assistance, the emotional support and encouragement he received was unconditional and was a major factor in his success in graduate school. In general, participants spoke about the importance of a supportive family or a support system that was absolutely critical to one’s success.

The other half of the participants described an “internal drive” to “make changes,” that allowed them to return and stay in school. These participants did not have any family, but instead relied on other support systems such as the church and close friends. One of the participants summarized her personal factors as largely a “personal drive that was fed by my nieces who looked up to me.” It was this sense of responsibility and role modeling for her nieces that kept her going.

### **Academic/Educational**

Academic or educational factors can either encourage retention or create obstacles for Latinos to complete their graduate education. Participants were asked to examine their graduate educational experiences and identify factors that promoted or discouraged their success in graduate school. The variation in post-MSW experience provided a wide array of issues that may be helpful to graduate schools in developing infrastructures to support Latino graduate students.

Participants identified several factors that contributed to their success in completing graduate school. For example, financial assistance provided by the schools was mentioned as an important and consistent factor that allowed them to pursue graduate education on a full-time basis. The stipends currently offered through the Title IV-E program in child welfare, the availability of paid placements, and federal stipend or training programs were also mentioned as important resources. One third of the participants mentioned the availability of Latino professors who were also involved in the community as practitioners, internships in familiar community settings, and Latino field instructors or role models as similarly important. One of the students specifically mentioned the “group experience” or the field seminar that was offered concurrently with the field as providing an excellent opportunity to bridge theory and practice. Flexible class schedules (i.e., Saturday classes) also helped students that were working full time. The emphasis of the graduate school’s curriculum on cultural diversity was also mentioned as an important factor in their success.

One of the participants also recalled that their graduate program allowed students to complete a “group thesis” which contributed to his successful completion of the program. The support he received from other Latino students also created a sense of camaraderie. Although Latino students were in the minority, the school’s emphasis on cultural diversity helped to create an environment of inclusiveness.

## **Workplace**

Participants were asked about their employers and what role if any they played in their decision to return and remain in graduate school. Most of the participants were able to take advantage of various financial assistance and flexible work schedules offered by their employers that made it possible for them to attend school on a full-time basis. A few mentioned the emergence of several initiatives such as 20/20 programs in some of the mental health departments that allow employees to work and attend school without losing their benefits, employers that encourage flexible work schedules, and several internal programs that offer incentives to employees with baccalaureate degrees to pursue their MSW during the work day. One of the participants stressed the importance of having a supportive supervisor as a critical factor in assisting employees in public mental health agencies. This was contrasted with another participant who left her employer because she did not receive the support that would allow her to work and attend school. She also said that the lack of support she received from fellow co-workers who were not attending school was a source of stress and needs to be addressed by supervisors and employers. Co-workers who are not attending school or have no interest in graduate school often perceive that they must carry additional clients or assume greater responsibilities to allow a fellow social worker to enroll in graduate school. If this issue is not addressed early, it will be difficult for the working student to remain in school and may actually discourage others who might have been interested in attending graduate school.

## **Barriers for Latino(as) Pursuing Graduate Social Work Education and Retention in Mental Health**

Despite the increasing demand for Latino(a) social workers, there is a critical shortage of Latinos pursuing graduate social work education. Participants were asked to identify some of the obstacles that keep Latinos from returning to school and what could be done to encourage young people to enter social work. Several of the participants indicated that the entrance examination requirements such as the GRE are often daunting. Once admitted, the thesis is often a problem for those students who may not have adequate writing or research skills. Several participants, however, indicated that students interested in pursuing graduate social work education should do more “homework” about the various requirements, financial assistance, and curriculum. For example, one of the local private graduate programs offers advanced standing for those holding a baccalaureate degree in social work or will waive the GRE if the individual has social work practice experience.

Several also discussed the negative image of the profession. One participant noted, “You never hear about how many families are re-unified or how many families now have homes.” Several counties have recently developed county-specific media messages promoting social work and mental health to counter some of the negative messages but they tend to be fragmented and inconsistent across the State.

The lack of adequately trained culturally competent supervisors was mentioned as a major problem in retaining Latino staff. Most of these supervisors have not been trained to supervise a diverse work force. One participant expressed his frustration over the lack of supervision he is now getting as he is preparing to take the LCSW exam. This lack of

cultural competency in the administration leadership makes it difficult for Latino social workers to get adequate supervision and consultation on cases involving Latino and other ethnic/cultural clients.

Significant attention was given to the salary differential for bilingual staff and their perception that their bilingual skills are not valued or seen as valuable. Some participants reported that bilingual staff sometimes deny they are bilingual so they can avoid the larger caseloads of their Latino counterparts. Others described situations in which they are assigned all Latino Spanish-speaking clients despite their skills and ability to work with diverse clients.

Most of the participants agreed that there needs to be a more concerted effort to work with high school students and their guidance counselors about social work. A recent graduate reported that he often speaks at local high schools about social work and recalled how his counselors shunned him when he told them he wanted to major in social work. As the class valedictorian, no one could understand why he would choose to attend a local state University and major in social work.

Despite the barriers and obstacles, one participant said she remains in social work because of a “personal commitment and the belief that I am making a difference.”

### **Training Needed To Support Retention of Latino(as) in Mental Health**

Most of the participants agreed that more attention should be given to providing adequate training to preparing supervisors to work effectively with a diverse workforce. According to the participants, much attention has focused on increasing the clinical and cultural competency of front line staff with relatively little attention given to training of supervisors. The lack of accountability for supervisors who are responsible for implementing programs, services, and policies aimed at improving cultural competency was also noted.

Participants also suggested greater collaboration with Schools of Social Work in promoting the profession. Local mental health departments should be encouraged to offer internal employment opportunities to high school students to dispel many of the negative perceptions about social work and mental health. Finally, one participant suggested that mental health departments offer “higher pay” in hard-to-hire areas. Several of the counties have developed consortiums and recruit social workers collaboratively rather than competitively.

### **Recommendations**

#### **1. Access to the Profession**

Participants offered several creative recommendations for improving access to Latinos interested in pursuing graduate social work education. According to most of the participants, they didn’t focus on social work when they began their undergraduate education. It seems that greater attention needs to be given to developing a better working relationship with high school counselors and advisors at community colleges. Both high

school counselors and community college advisors were perceived as critical gatekeepers to the profession. Their lack of familiarity with the social work profession is based largely on the fact that they do not have a clear idea of the profession. It is not surprising then that these critical gatekeepers will talk about career opportunities in fields that they do know. This lack of knowledge coupled with the negative public image of social work is a major obstacle. This observation was consistent among all participants who “discovered” this profession as a result of their own initiative. One of the participants, the class valedictorian, recalled how disappointed his advisors were when he told them he was going to major in social work. As a result of this early experience, he continues to make annual presentations at his high school about professional social work in the hopes of encouraging others to pursue a career in social work.

The decision to pursue a specific sub-specialty is influenced by where a student completes their field practicum and the quality of field instruction. Once a decision is made to pursue graduate education, having a supportive family and workplace environment as well as financial assistance are important factors that contribute to success.

## **2. Improving the Image of Social Work**

The participants identified several strategies for improving the largely negative image of the profession and recommended greater collaboration between Schools of Social Work and mental health departments. For example, they suggested tapping into the large numbers of high school students who are not quite sure what they want to pursue as a potential pool of future social workers. Those working in public mental health should develop a list of dynamic speakers who can relate to students and promote the numerous opportunities in social work. This should be done in collaboration with Schools of Social Work. The participants talked about several county-specific campaigns that were aimed at improving the image of social work, but these are not consistent. For example, one participant talked about the media’s portrayal of social workers as those that remove children from their families—yet stories about families being reunified after a crisis, or the advocacy done by social workers on behalf of clients is seldom portrayed. Editorials describing the many facets of social work could be one way of promoting the profession.

## **3. Retaining Diverse Social Work Professionals**

Training of supervisors and administrators in cultural competency emerged as an important topic for retaining Latinos and multicultural and multiethnic professional social workers. It is not clear whether supervisors receive specific training in supervision of ethnically and culturally diverse staff. Participants generally agreed that their employers encourage and often provide training on cultural competency and other topics to social workers. There seems to be an erroneous assumption that supervisors and administrators don’t need this type of training or that it is not necessary. However, the consensus of the group was that this is an overlooked area that needs further examination.

## **4. Barriers to Pursuing a Career in Social Work**

Participants indicated that they discovered the social work profession after their peers suggested that social work is a career that allows one to work with people. Most were

already enrolled in other majors when they learned that social work might be a “better fit.” These participants described their early experiences in working with people, their commitment to social justice or “giving back” to their communities. Again, a major barrier was the fact that critical gatekeepers do not know enough about social work to suggest it as an option to high school students or community college graduates. One recommendation may be to establish high school affiliates of the Latino Social Work Network in targeted schools. This would allow high schools or community college students to work with professional social workers, develop a cadre of mentors and create a pipeline to undergraduate and graduate schools of social work.

## **5. Recruitment of Latinos(as) in Mental Health**

Although the participants provided rich descriptions of their experiences and their observations of other Latinos entering graduate school and working in mental health, it is recommended that the Council consider including only social workers working in public mental health if they wish to specifically ascertain how to increase Latinos in mental health. Also, if the goal is to explore factors that promote graduate social work education subsequent focus groups may need to include only those participants who have the MSW degree.



## **CALIFORNIA MENTAL HEALTH PLANNING COUNCIL**

### **Asian/Pacific Islander Focus Group**

**November 30, 2001**

**Los Angeles, California**

**Facilitator: Taffany Lim**

### **Introduction**

The California Mental Health Planning Council identified shortages in human resources at all levels of service as one of the most urgent issues facing the mental health system. The Planning Council—particularly concerned with the recruitment of multicultural and multilingual social workers—organized a series of focus groups with culturally and ethnically diverse mental health professionals in order to develop strategies for the recruitment and retention of multicultural students in social work and psychiatry graduate programs.

On Friday, November 30, 2001 in Los Angeles, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON) hosted a focus group of twelve Asian/Pacific Islander (API) social workers. All of the participants were female, but their diverse ethnic backgrounds included Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Asian Indian, and Tongan representatives. The participants, all of whom had either a LCSW or MSW, were employed with one of the many community based mental health organizations in Los Angeles County such as Little Tokyo Service Center, Western Region Asian Pacific Family Services (WRAP), Korean Youth and Community Center, Pan Asian Community Center, Asian Rehabilitation Services, Asian Pacific Health Venture, and one in private practice.

Following brief introductions, the focus group participants were lead through a series of questions designed to elicit strategies and recommendations that will assist with the recruitment and retention of Asian/Pacific Islanders in the field of social work as captured below.

### **Recommendations for Improving the Image of Social Work in the Community**

The participants agreed that in general, the Asian/Pacific Islander community does not view the field of social work favorably. Social work is typically regarded as stressful, low-paying, and unprestigious work—particularly to Asian parents who have high hopes for doctors and lawyers in the family. The focus group participants suggested that the negative stereotype is partially due to a *lack of awareness* about what social workers actually do, however *cultural values* play a significant role as well. As one participant explained, “Asians are not raised to deal with their emotions and feelings. Asian kids are brought up to believe that their only job is to get ‘A’s in school.” Because the culture does not stress the value of expressing feelings and emotions, it is difficult for the API community to grasp the importance of mental health professionals.

It was agreed, however, that Asian/Pacific Islanders generally place a high value on money while the image of social work is not one of a high paying profession. In fact, more than one participant claimed that a friend or family member had equated social work with “volunteer work.”

The focus group participants repeatedly stressed the importance of community outreach and education to help improve the image of social work in the community. They noted that currently, the only media coverage social workers are likely to receive is negative and usually involves mistakes or oversights they've made in the field. A marketing plan for the API community, however, would also have to include educational campaigns directed to APIs to break the stereotype that mental illness does not exist in the Asian/Pacific Islander community. It was recommended that educational outreach should also be extended to other professions so that they can better understand the role of social workers and appreciate their professional versatility.

It was suggested that the prestige of social work would increase if there existed a more uniform *definition of social work* and a *system of standards within the social work profession*. The participants complained that the term "social worker" is used generically. At the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) "caseworkers" without degrees or personnel with only a "bachelors in social work" are called social workers, as are their colleagues with MSWs or even doctorates in social work. One focus group participant recommended that "Schools of Social Work on college campuses should get together and come up with a clear definition of what social work really is."

Finally, it was generally agreed that the overall prestige of social work would increase if social workers received higher salaries and compensation for their work.

### **Recommendations for Recruiting Individuals into Social Work Professions**

Each of the focus group participants indicated that they had never planned to become a social worker or grew up thinking that social work would be their future career. Many did not know that there are schools of social work in college. For many, it was the right combination of a passion for giving to others, parental role modeling, and serendipitous discovery during undergraduate course work that lead them to pursue an MSW.

In the instance of many of the focus group participants, the "passion for giving" was encouraged by parents who instilled philosophies such as, "Whenever you can help, there is something you can do. And it doesn't have to be big." Yet, while almost every woman in the focus group acknowledged a lifelong passion for giving, they also found themselves majoring in computer science, math, and biology while in college. While fulfilling their undergraduate requirements, more than one decided to switch into the field of social work. "I was so BORED in my math classes! But in my psychology classes, I couldn't wait to do the reading I thought it was so interesting," said one woman who ultimately changed her career from computer programming to social work.

The focus group participants suggested that there are many students who have a passion to serve and a desire to contribute to their community but are not *aware* that there are professions where these qualities can be channeled. They recommended conducting outreach to students as early as junior high school and introducing them to career opportunities in social work. It was recommended that the Planning Council work with the Department of Mental Health and actively support the "Mental Health Academy" to introduce young people to the profession. Role models and mentors during the early college

years are valuable as well. One participant said she decided to become a social worker after hearing a guest speaker in one of her classes talk about her job and the many unmet needs in the API community. Another participant suggested that agencies should offer more one-on-one counseling for API boys to keep them in school and encourage them to give back to their community upon graduation.

*Role models*, particularly those who share an API background, are also motivating factors. More than one participant spoke of a professor, family member, or community advocate who introduced them to the field of social work and encouraged their involvement. One participant spoke fondly of well-known Filipino community activist Royal Morales. Another mentioned that the Director of Social Work at her university was also Hawaiian and so they started a relationship.

Finally, it was suggested that social work schools need to recruit API students more aggressively.

### **Recommendations for Overcoming Barriers to Pursuing Social Work as a Profession**

The focus group participants were in agreement that *financial aid* was the most important source of support that allowed them to pursue their MSWs and careers in social work. *More people need to become aware of the widespread availability of scholarships* for graduate students pursuing a degree in social work. One participant explained that as an international student, costs for attending graduate school in the United States are so prohibitive that it would not have been possible without a scholarship from the school. Money made available from DCFS and the Department of Mental Health through the “CALSWIC Stipend Program” (which pays for a student’s graduate school education with the requirement that they commit two years to the county after graduation) also made an education in social work more attractive. The focus group participants explained that because the degree requires a lot of internship hours, it is difficult to hold down a job concurrently. Paid internships and stipends also make social work more appealing.

It was recommended that the California Mental Health Planning Council should advocate for legislation to create a “loan forgiveness program” for social workers, much like that which exists for doctors and nurses. Other supports that might attract social workers are programs that assist immigrants with applying for Visas.

It was acknowledged that the API community is impressed by what may be considered “prestigious” or “status” positions. Thus, it was recommended that more Schools of Social Work develop dual-degree Masters programs. For example, a graduate student could concurrently pursue an MSW while working towards a law degree. Another thing that universities can do to help students become social workers is to offer more part-time MSW programs such as the one operated out of Cal State Long Beach.

In addition to the *financial support*, family, friends, co-workers, and community provided *encouragement and emotional support*. Many of the focus group participants entered graduate school with English as their second language. One participant explained that it was only the tutoring of her siblings that helped her overcome her frustrations of writing college papers in English. Another participant said that Cal State Sacramento offers a tutorial writing program

that supports students struggling with the English language. Three others said that it was their fellow API co-workers and LCSWs who kept them motivated when they were feeling the most discouraged. Informal support and encouragement from the API community (“The Tongan community will always pray for you,” one participant said) and reminders from API leaders about the tremendous needs within their communities kept them going. It was suggested that the more that people become generally *aware and knowledgeable* about community needs and the social work profession, the more supportive they will be to future social workers. Thus, outreach and education are very important factors in helping APIs join the mental health field.

### **Recommendations for Retention of Social Workers**

The focus group had many recommendations for the retention of social workers in the profession. There was agreement among the focus group participants around the table that there is a great burden upon bilingual social workers that easily leads to *burn out*. Bilingual social workers need *reduced caseloads* and *more opportunities for advancement* to keep them in the profession. More than one participant lamented, however, that even the most burned-out bilingual social workers will not leave the job for fear that “If I don’t do it, who will?” The lack of bilingual social workers is also difficult for clients who have a limited number of bilingual options or alternatives.

“The system and administrators must be improved to recognize and value bilingual social workers and their contribution,” said one participant. Lack of *cultural competence* among managers, supervisors, and co-workers presents a frustrating “glass ceiling” for many API social workers. For example, many bilingual social workers become marginalized as “just bilingual social workers.” Not only do these social workers have an overwhelming case load because the community needs are so great, but they do not get the support or assistance they need to help them advance. These social workers “don’t have the energy to become managers,” said one participant. API social workers need to feel that they are not limited by their language and cultural skills, but that there are opportunities to promote and move up within their field.

Focus group participants recommended that *cultural competence and diversity training* should be offered to management and supervisory positions. They believe that training will assist with communication between management and staff. It would also help some agencies recognize that “Western models” of social work for the mainstream may not be as applicable to API communities—requiring social workers to innovate new strategies and techniques when working with the API communities.

Social work and community advocacy was described by one participant as “lonely” work. Focus group participants who had received their graduate degrees more than 20 or 30 years ago lamented the loss of *Asian Pacific American support groups*. At one time, there was an Asian Caucus which matched mentors with students in graduate school. The NIMH had also funded the Asian Mental Health Training Center (AMTRAC) which provided a way for mental health professionals to meet, network, share stories, and offer mutual support at least once a week. The program reportedly lasted 10 years and helped many API students overcome the challenges of graduate school and professional social

work. Today's social workers, participants explained, are much too overwhelmed by their caseloads and required paper work to meet regularly and such organized support systems no longer exist.

## CALIFORNIA MENTAL HEALTH PLANNING COUNCIL

### African American Focus Group

March 26, 2002

San Francisco, California

Facilitator: Liz Dunbar Knox, MEd, MSW, EdD

### Introduction

The process of telling your story has always been a powerful use of gathering information in the African American community. It truly opens up the means for participants to have a voice that oftentimes can go unheard or is not solicited.

The focus group met on March 26, 2002 in San Francisco. There were ten (10) participants, two males and eight females. The majority of the participants worked primarily in child welfare departments for the City and County of San Francisco. Seven have earned their MSW, two are currently students in MSW programs at local universities. One participant is an MFT with background experience in child welfare.

### Personal Motivation

Participants were inspired and encouraged by people who had the kind of life experience to recognize that they could work with people. They had the natural connection that lends to a helping attitude that is indicative of going into social work. Most were drawn by the conditions that they lived and grew up with in their communities. With a sense of innateness, most participants expressed an “***I should help attitude because social work is about helping people.***” The personal experience that existed in their cultural environment was a motivator for most. Their stories conveyed certain messages that they got from family members, friends, people who they worked with, instructors, and those who seem to recognize their ability to want to help. The notion of working with children was also very present in making decisions about their career choices.

Social work seems to be a field of attraction. Nobody was forced into it or felt pressure to do this kind of work. One can interpret this as being consistent with the belief in the African American community that if it is for the collective good of the people then, it is the right and just thing to do. It is in the spirit of helping and that spirit of helping is something to be shared.

There were recurring themes that support the philosophy of helping as a good thing. Always wanting to help others, wanting to work with children, wanting to make an impact on the lives of others, the strong desire to make a difference even when their socio-economic status would not be advanced. Most went into social work with full knowledge that this is not a profession that will lead to significant financial gain.

The experience becomes the personal motivation even if it was from a “not so positive origin.” For example, the participant who talked about “ending up on the wrong side of the law,” saw this life experience as positive. This person was able to come back and use this real life lesson to make a contribution to the community. There was one person who came

through the foster care system as a youth that according to her, “is often viewed as a not so positive experience,” but she used it as a motivator to become a professional social worker.

## **Barriers**

Financial issues were persistent barriers throughout most of the participants’ educational studies. African Americans rarely have the luxury of being full-time students without having the responsibility of maintaining employment as a necessity to stay in school. It is not uncommon for many to work part- to full-time while enrolled in a full-time MSW program. Many have family responsibilities including children, siblings or other extended family members to care for or contribute to the maintenance of the family household.

Recognizing that the duality of education and employment exist and that tension should be supported in a way so it does not discourage the student’s ability to perform. The limitations of this reality of how some people in some cultures make it, is seen as an obstacle by some faculty and not recognized as strengths. The idea that one is able to manage a complex life under challenging circumstances should be applauded not looked at as a point of criticism for why one would not do well in school. As one participant shared, she feared letting her adviser know that she was going through a divorce because she would not be encouraged to remain in school because she had this pressing family situation. The idea that as a student you have problems or you have to work then the performance expectation is lowered. The endurance factor and ability to cope has to be assessed in accordance with history and achievement considerations that can be culturally bound. History supports that some of the most outstanding educational achievements among African Americans have been accomplished under some of the most severe circumstances.

Another barrier that may be common to people of color as they move up the educational and professional ladders is to endure cultural isolation. When you are the only African American in a particular setting and you are expected to be the voice for the entire African American community can be tremendous pressure. There is an assumed notion that it is your responsibility, as an African American, to explain every behavior or issue that exists within the African American culture. The onus of cultural diversity and the teaching about cultural differences seems to be placed on the persons of color.

Not having African American representation at the management level in Department of Human Services came up as a critical issue. This will also extend to developing an ongoing support system that can address cultural issues that arise in service delivery and in higher education. There is a need for University faculty that could provide not only role models, but serve as mentors.

Participants wished to make a distinction between having black consciousness and having just a black face as an indication that there is true cultural representation. While there are people who are seen as being black, they may not have the interest of the African American community at heart. When there are conflicts within the agency because of a different cultural perspective, there will be those at the helm who can help to articulate concerns and facilitate a process to come up with different solutions that can engender cultural sensitivity.

A barrier is created when the agency rules/policies conflict with the social worker's cultural value system, especially in child welfare work. In the African American community the issue of child removal and placement could be viewed differently when all perspectives are respected.

To acknowledge when a social worker has gone above and beyond the call of duty and it is not overlooked as "just doing your job."

## **Retention**

Acknowledgement of a job well done is needed. There should be some way to honor and respect and appreciate the challenge involved in working with families and children. One participant shared how she felt when there was a degree of break through in getting a client into much needed therapy.

Cross training in social work, mental health, public health, medical, etc. would help to better serve their clients. The social work profession cannot exist in isolation.

The salary disparity between the veteran BSW and the new MSW and the need to clarify the distinction without jeopardizing professional relationships that is valuable to providing quality and comprehensive services.

Agency rules and policies should be more in alignment with the cultural understanding that represents the reality of the African American community and tradition without foregoing the protection of children. Creative and outside-of-the-box ideas are overlooked for the sake of staying with the status quo. One participant exclaimed that, "I feel like I am working against my people instead of helping them" because of the rigidity in the interpretation of rules and policies.

## **Recommendations**

All participants emphasized more openness to policymakers to listen and respond more to the concerns that has to do with their work conditions, service delivery and recommendations to seriously make changes. There should be an ongoing voice to provide input to the legislators.

Other recommendations included:

- Create rotation from child welfare to mental health to avoid burnout.
- There should be more aggressive recruitment efforts that go beyond once a year.
- Have more expanded stipends for students that extend beyond child welfare (Title IV-E).
- Stipends to pay off student loans for social workers who are working with under-served populations.
- Reeducate society about who social workers are and what they do. To promote a positive image whereby social workers are viewed as consumer friendly.
- Activate a vocal group to advocate for changes.



- Have a more organized process for supervision for licensure.
- Advocate for better pay that would address the salary disparity between public and nonprofit agencies.
- Regular ongoing focus groups to assess the needs of the field and give feedback to policymakers.

**Facilitator's Observation and Feedback**

Statement: The presence of a supervisor who was from another cultural group did not provide the kind of environment that would lend to a free flowing discussion. Even the presence of the representative from the Council was to some degree, a hindrance. I have done dozens of groups in the African American community and I know the value of how to have authentic discussion.

## **CALIFORNIA MENTAL HEALTH PLANNING COUNCIL**

**Latino(a) Focus Group**

**May 22, 2002**

**Modesto, California**

**Facilitator: José Pedro Martín, LMFT**

### **Summary**

The California Mental Health Planning Council identified the increasing shortage of professional social workers, particularly in public mental health as a major problem that will require immediate and long-range planning. In an effort to obtain insight about factors that support and inhibit Latinos(as) from pursuing careers in social work, a focus group was conducted with social workers employed in various settings to learn what Schools of Social Work and Mental Health Departments could do to recruit and train more multicultural and bilingual professional social workers. The Council has already held several other focus groups as part of their planning process.

Using the *Conocimiento* process, participants described their personal motivation for choosing a career in social work and the support systems that contributed to their success in graduate school. The group was made up of Latino(a) social workers from a more rural region of the state. The group identified culturally competent supervisors, Latino(a) professionals, and teachers as an important, yet often overlooked factor in retaining highly diverse professional social workers.

The group identified several strategies for improving the “pipeline” to the profession such as mentoring and graduate school professors taking students “under their wing,” economic incentives like career-ladder programs, opportunity for growth, providing personal and academic support throughout, and bilingual pay. There was general consensus that they had a calling, a “vocation” to help others in their community and the social work field seems to provide the vehicle to improve their community directly. Political awareness about issues affecting Latinos and the desire to improve conditions was likewise a factor that motivated most of them. These and other factors continue to keep them in the profession. A need for social services and mental health systems to do a self-assessment as to why Latinos are not entering and/or leaving was likewise pointed out.

### **Background**

The California Mental Health Planning Council advocates for children, adults and older adults with serious and emotional disturbances or mental illness. The Council also provides oversight and accountability for the public mental health system, serves in an advisory role to the Administration and Legislature on priority issues and participates in statewide planning.

Shortages in human resources at all levels of service has emerged as one of the most urgent issues facing the mental health system that will require immediate and long term strategies to address this critical problem. One of those strategies focuses on examining the recruitment and retention of multicultural and multilingual social workers into mental health. A series of focus groups with culturally and ethnically diverse mental health staff has been organized in

an effort to obtain insight into what graduate schools of social work and public mental health departments can do individually and collaboratively to recruit more multicultural students into professional social work, particularly public mental health.

This particular ethnic group was held on May 22, 2002 in Modesto with eight Latinos(as) currently employed in the San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Yolo, and Fresno County areas by various social service organizations. The gender of the participants was evenly mixed, four women and four men. The group ranged from 2 to 29 years of post-MSW experience. Graduate schools attended range from UCLA, San Jose State University, Fresno State University, Santa Clara University, and Stanislaus State University. The age of the participants range from the 20s to the late 50s. The range of agencies worked for are medical social work, social services, mental health, and substance abuse.

All 8 participants are bilingual Spanish speaking, evenly divided between those born in Mexico and those born in California. All shared similar backgrounds in socio-economic family background from working class and farmworkers. The majority reported that they all came into the field of social work by “accident.” They all profess a “zeal to help people.” Mentorship by other Latino(a) professionals was a common experience in their background and motivation to enter this field of work.

### **Personal Motivation for Becoming a Social Worker**

As participants shared their background and situations that led them to choose the field of social work, it became apparent that their personal experience in their communities and the socio-political climate as it affected their communities was a major factor in choosing to pursue a degree and work in the field of social work. There was no awareness that this field existed when they were in the undergraduate phase of their training. Through contact with community agencies and other Latino(a) professionals they became aware of the field and motivated to pursue a graduate degree. Direct experience working in helping others like at a high school, with Vietnam Vets, migrant workers, witnessing their parents performing social work in the community motivated them to enter the field. As one participant stated, “my parents were ‘social workers’ without a degree. They would take things back to those in need in Mexico.”

Experiencing difficulties getting service, due to language barriers, for family members was yet another motivating factor for a couple of participants. Seeing conflicts between the Latino youth and the local police likewise motivated another participant to fight injustice because she equated social work with social change. The majority felt that they had a calling or “vocation” to help others. Spirituality appears to be a central motivating theme that continues to be part of their present work and outlook.

### **Personal Barriers to Graduate School**

The personal barriers to graduate school most identified were academic preparation, expectations, and lack of support from the institutions. Other barriers identified include learning disabilities, family and community not understanding the value of higher education, prejudice from teachers, being considered not college material due to the Stanford-Binet IQ test given when they were not fully bilingual, study skills, not knowing what to expect of a

graduate program, and lack of orientation to the program. What stood out is that for many of them being bilingual and having the educational experience that did not adequately prepare them academically, making it difficult to engage in the learning process.

Teachers seem to have not valued their abilities because of their English language limitations, thereby not giving them the needed attention. Not having had a good orientation to writing research and analysis papers made it difficult for several of them when they had to do so in graduate school. Many recommended that faculty need to be more accessible to students. Several pointed out that they had faculty who did not know their subject well. One participant recommended that graduate schools provide an orientation for ethnic students to teach them how to think analytically.

For a couple of the younger women child care for their children was a barrier that made it more difficult to get through school. They felt that the institution was not sufficiently sensitive to the needs of single mothers with child care needs. Another barrier identified is the inflexibility of the institution when addressing the internship requirements. This was connected to financial and child care needs that conflicted at times with the internship requirements. The other barrier identified is not having enough ethnic students in the graduate program with them. Being the only minority student posed stress at different levels for them.

### **Recommendations for Retaining Staff in Human Services Positions**

The group was very enthusiastic about and creative in giving recommendations for retaining Latino(a) staff in human services positions. Among the recommendations, they pointed out that mentoring by other Latino(a) professionals, and professors taking students “under their wing” was very important for Latino(a) students. Providing opportunity to grow professionally through trainings, conferences, working on committees, becoming trainers, and preparation for management positions are some of what they felt would keep Latino(a) professionals in the public human services sector. Economic incentives in the form of bilingual pay, higher salaries that compete with those teachers now get was identified as an important factor in recruitment and retention. It was pointed out that many Latinos(as) now are considering going into education because the salary is much better than social work and you don’t need to get a license.

Having culturally competent supervisors was another strong recommendation by the group. It was expressed that too often they encountered supervisors who did not understand the nuances of working with Latino families and expected the same style and time as working with White families. Consequently, they strongly suggested that a program to train supervisors in cultural competence is very important if you are to retain Latino(a) staff.

Providing a mentorship process for staff throughout the licensure process was another recommendation. Giving supervisors a reduction in caseload to allow them to offer mentorship would facilitate assisting staff getting their license faster. Another important point raised and recommendation given was that too often Latino(a) staff are stretched out too thinly, especially bilingual staff, and that supervisors need to reduce the caseload so that they can adequately provide the services in a cultural and linguistic manner, that normally takes more time than other cases. Along with this point supporting staff, getting to know

their strengths and personal goals, and encouraging them to get their license and MSWs was strongly identified.

Another recommendation addressed the economic factor of providing retention pay like they are currently offering in nursing and making mental health and social services be more at par in salary with other professions.

Cultural competency, developing and improving language skills to become bicultural workers along with offering career-ladder programs was viewed as a strong motivator for retaining Latino(a) staff. It was agreed upon by all the participants that having Latinos(as) at the management level was very important for retention because it gave the message that they were valued and that they could have a chance to advance in their career and not be stuck as a line worker forever. Having flexible time schedules for staff to go back to school and get the MSW along with support groups for Latino(a) staff they felt is very important for the system to recruit and retain staff. Most felt that too often there is little recognition for the work they do by their supervisors. Having more culturally competent and sensitive supervisors would address that issue.

Overall, the group was very clear and in agreement that the presence of a cultural competence committee that addresses cultural and linguistic issues of the communities they work with provides an atmosphere and a message that their work is valued and that the system is responsive to the needs of the Latino community. It was pointed out that agencies need to do a self-evaluation to determine why Latino and other ethnic staff are leaving.

The group could have continued with further recommendations but time ran out. It is clear that these Latino(a) professionals had much to offer from their personal experiences and from their insights. The enthusiasm for their work was quite evident as well as their concern about the future of Latinos(as) in the social work and mental health field. They voiced their concern that other fields are attracting Latinos(as) by virtue of the economic incentives. At the same time they expressed that many Latinos(as) in their community, if given the chance and proper support, would choose to enter the social work and mental health field.

### **Personal Observation**

My personal observation in conducting this focus group is that there is much we can learn from listening to ethnic minority professionals in the field of social work and mental health. Their experiences and insights can help those in the planning and legislative arena design programs that provide the necessary personal, economic, educational, and professional support needed to attract and retain ethnic and bilingual people into the profession. Attention needs to be placed on the administrative and supervisory structure of the systems that provide services to ethnic minority communities. Too often there are not enough culturally and linguistically competent people at those levels who can support and motivate ethnic staff to continue with their education and advance professionally, and in the organization. The salary structure in public mental health and social services needs to be looked at if we are to compete with private sector and education system for ethnic and bilingual candidates.

## **CALIFORNIA MENTAL HEALTH PLANNING COUNCIL**

### **Human Resources Pilot Ethnic Focus Group Project**

#### **Pilot Focus Group Purpose**

The Human Resources Committee seeks to document the barriers and obstacles to MSW programs for people of color. The MSWs of color who will participate in four pilot groups will provide data that will become the basis for the Committee's decision about how to use the data and whether to convene further social work ethnic focus groups.

#### **Duration**

Pilot groups will be scheduled for 2 hours, with a 1/2 hour wrap-up at the end, during November and early December.

#### **Required Questions for Focus Group Participants**

- 1. What was your personal motivation for becoming a social worker?**
  - What is it that would make you want to come into this field?
  - Perception that social work is field-based not office-bound?
  - People sometimes go into social work indirectly, i.e., through psychology or for social justice reasons.
  - Social work sometimes attracts people who want to change their community.
- 2. What are the personal barriers to graduate school?**
  - What, if anything, put you off before you decided to apply?
  - Lack of self-confidence?
  - Cultural barriers?
  - Single parenting?
  - Tuition/other financial barriers?
- 3. What are the academic barriers to graduate school?**
  - Length of time to get a degree?
  - Negative experiences with college recruiters?
  - Were the academic counselors adequate?
  - Barriers to financial information?
  - Barriers to knowing what's required of them by the school and the program?
  - How welcoming is the school?
  - What are the supports available and how do they get that knowledge out?
  - Courses appear culturally insensitive?
  - School "politics" put students off?
- 4. What are the cultural barriers to graduate school?**
  - What role does the stigma of mental illness play in choosing public mental health as a social work career?
  - Problems with school of social work expectations?
  - Families may be reticent to support higher education, distrustful of higher education (economic reasons).

- In some cultures people are pressed to have kids early; women are not encouraged to get an education.

**5. Are there other barriers to graduate school?**

**6. What keeps you in social work, including public mental health?**

### **Optional Questions**

**1. What is the image of social work in your community?**

- What kind of exposure do people have to social work?
- Most people connect social work to welfare rather than to mental health.

**2. How well known and how accessible are MSW programs?**

- How did you hear about the MSW program?
- It is thought that there are more MFTs than MSWs because MFT programs are viewed as more accessible, less costly, more flexible.

**3. What are successful strategies for becoming a graduate student?**

- What was the bridge for you between the BA and the MSW?
- What created the pathway or what was the pathway?
- What facilitated your being able to enter graduate school??
- What supports are needed?
- What do academic programs need to do?
- Resources: EOPS/Reentry students have a higher rate of retention?
- Need mentors, information about resources, student associations?
- What would be helpful for us to provide to get around the barriers?

**4. How did you discover the field of social work?**

**5. What did you know about social work and social workers?**

**6. How did you become aware that social work is a profession requiring a master's degree?**

**7. What role did your MSW program play in your decision to select or not select a public mental health field placement?**

- The entry point is the college field coordinators; does the student get a good experience in the field placement?
- Did your field coordinator inform you of public mental health internships?

**8. What was your motivation for choosing or not choosing public mental health as a social work career?**